

A Tale of Two Poppets

Louise Fenton

On a visit to the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic in 2009, a chance meeting between myself, Louise Fenton, and Graham King, the then owner of the Museum, led to the start of years of research and fascination with the stories behind the curses in the collection (to be included in a forthcoming publication with Troy Books). It began with an introduction to two curious clay dolls, wrapped in brown paper, black tissue paper and 'Boots the Chemist' ribbon, that lay in the cabinet of curses along with other poppets. The dolls on display were all intended to harm, yet their histories were relatively unknown. These two poppets were to be the focus of the initial research. This is their story...

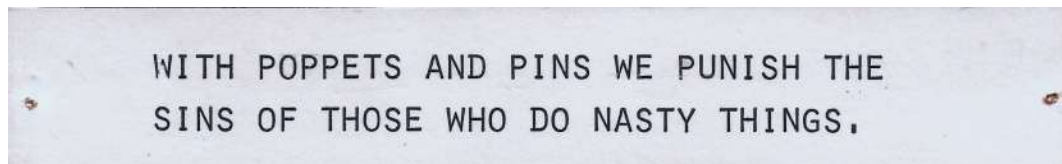


Fig.1 Document 7252. Archives at the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic, Cecil H Williamson
(Image courtesy of the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic)

Since the earliest records of curses and cursing, clay has been a material widely used. This is because of the availability of the material and the fact it can easily moulded into the likeness, or effigy, of the person to be cursed. It is also malleable so that pins, thorns or other sharp implements can be easily inserted as part of a cursing spell or ritual.

The use of clay features in the Lancaster Witch Trials of 1612, when Elizabeth Southern, known as Demdike, was alleged to have stated:

“The speediest way to take a man’s life away with witchcraft, is to make a picture of clay, like unto the shape of the person whom they mean to kill, and dry it thoroughly. And when they would have them be ill in any one place more than another; then take a thorn or pin, and prick it in that part of the picture you would so have to be ill. And when you would have any part of the body to consume away, then take that part of the picture and burn it. And when they would have the whole body to consume away, then take the remnant of the said picture, and burn it: and so there-upon by that means, the body shall die” (recorded in *Discovery of Witches* by Thomas Potts, 1613).



Fig.2 The clay poppets, object number 1292 and 1293, Museum of Witchcraft and Magic

Many poppets made of clay did not survive. This in part is due to their ritual use where they may have been destroyed in fire or left to disintegrate. Sometimes the target would have tried to destroy the poppet and break the curse. Over the years, since it was founded in 1951, the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic has received poppets from people who have accidentally discovered them, or who were uncertain of their intentions and felt uncomfortable about them. Those that have survived clearly show the fragility of materials used. The image in fig.1 shows a label written by Cecil H Williamson relating to poppets and the harmful intent.

The two poppets to be discussed are unique; a pair of dolls that are very unusual creations. They are made from builders' clay, commonly known as putty. They have a grey pallor and are showing signs of deterioration with cracks appearing, however, the wrapping in brown paper, tissue paper and ribbon is helping to preserve them. The one striking, and most unique feature to these dolls, is the fact that they appeared to have names and addresses written on the brown paper that shrouds them, something to date not found elsewhere. When researching in the Museum archives, original labels were found that relate to these, typed on card, one of them reads;

"Pair of figures, male and female, made from builders putty by a man wishing to be revenged upon another man (note pins in head) who had gone off with his wife"

It should be noted at this point that there is no known significance of the pins in the head relating to a male figure, and the label was taken as an indication of the reason for the curse, however, further research was required.

The dolls were examined carefully with help from Graham King and the written addresses analysed. They were difficult to decipher as the pencil had faded over time, the paper had crinkled and the handwriting was stylised. Nevertheless, it was established that both of the dolls were addressed as 'Oakdene Road, Brockham, Surrey', one with the name 'Ros Wood' and the other with the name 'Elliott'.

When considering the images of the dolls in Fig. 2 it is clear that there was an intention of harm. The doll on the left has multiple pins inserted into the head and nowhere else, the other has the head and upper body covered with black tissue paper with pins fixing the hooded head all around the neck.

The writing revealed both the names of the intended victims and the location in the village of Brockham, Surrey. The village of Brockham still exists, and research uncovered that much of it was developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with Oakdene Road being built in the early 1950s. Through contacting the Boots archive it was established that the vintage 'Boots the Chemist' ribbon around both dolls dated from the late 1940s, possibly early 1950s. The next step was to identify the people named on the poppets, Ros Wood and Elliott, believed to be the wife and her lover.

The doll with the pins in the head, identified by Cecil H Williamson as male had the name Ros Wood on it and the other doll, shrouded in black tissue had the name Elliott. Following on from the discovery of the labels it appeared that the creator of this curse had been wronged by his wife and that she had had an affair with another man, however, assumptions should not be made and evidence was needed.

Research was undertaken at the Surrey History Centre to establish who the victims of this curse were. In 1953 a Mr David Wood and Mrs Ros Wood lived at the address on the one poppet, and a 'Miss' Elliott lived at the other address written. This demonstrated the authenticity of the dolls. Mr Wood was found to be a builder. For decades it had been assumed that the name Elliott had referred to the man alleged to have wronged Mr Wood, as per the label in the archives, however, it had been uncovered that the people at the addresses told a different story as Elliott was 'Miss'; a woman. Things moved on and living arrangements changed. In the following year, in 1954, the records show that Mrs Wood was living at the same address as Miss Elliott. It could be assumed that the dolls were made by Mr Wood as vengeance against Mrs Wood and Miss Elliott and their alleged affair. This was the 1950s, in a rural location, and so it could be argued that same sex relationships were still taboo and would have been frowned upon within the community. It was also quite usual for Cecil Williamson to protect his sources by changing their identities, or in this case, their gender. It is likely that there was a deliberate emphasis on his label when he stresses "revenged upon another man".

These poppets have been in the collection at the Museum of Witchcraft and Magic for decades and have lain together within the cabinet of curses. Their story is one of hurt, anger and betrayal from the point of view of the creator. The dolls were made after the repeal of the Witchcraft Act in 1951; a time when it has been shown that many people felt the freedom to utilise the possibilities of Witchcraft and Magic, including curses.

It is probable that Mrs Wood was not having an affair with another man but that her husband believed her to be having an affair with a woman, her neighbour, Miss Elliott. It is likely that Mr Wood made the poppets to curse his wife and her lover and that he avoided identifying the sex of her lover by writing just the surname, 'Elliott' on the doll. It is clear that Mr Wood made these dolls to cause harm to both his wife and Miss Elliott, the pins are testament to this, inserted into the head of one doll and around the throat of the other. As described by Martin Duffy in his book *Effigy* (2015),

“Struck into the image, the pin becomes the binder of the spell, affirming the locus where the magic is to take affect and serving as a beacon for spiritous and numinous powers. Moreover, like the Nowl thrust into the earth, the nail driven into the clay not only fixes power, but also declares the centre and circumference of its influence.” (p301)

So, the question is whether it worked.

By 1955 none of those named were living in Oakdene Road, in the village of Brockham, Surrey, or the surrounding area. Extensive searches of electoral roles, death records, shipping manifestos and other family record sources revealed nothing, they had gone. Local newspaper and radio appeals were made for anyone that knew these people to come forward, again, without fruition. If this was a same sex affair, in a rural village, it may be that names were changed. This is relatively recent and it may be that the local community wish to protect their own and deter sensation hunters and gossip-mongers from raking up the past.

All of those involved could not be found, either by choice or by circumstance. The research on the clay poppets does continue and one day it is hoped there will be a conclusion into this fascinating insight to curses of the twentieth century. Unless of course it did not end well for those targeted and the curse really did work...

Sources

Duffy, M. (2015) *Effigy* Three Hands Press: USA

Potts, T. (2011: 1613) *The Wonderful Discovery of Witches* Palatine Books: UK

Museum of Witchcraft and Magic archives, The Harbour, Boscastle, Cornwall